

If We Had To Do It Over Again: Implementing Learner Autonomy in the 21st century

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It's too hot. I'm standing outside the Kasımiye Medresesi in Mardin, Turkey. We are on a tour after the conference. People from the conference are inside. I'm outside talking to local people. Young girls and children are selling handicrafts under the sun to earn some money. I'm walking towards the young ladies sitting at a little stand.



- *Hi, girls. Are you from this village?*
- *Yes, and you sister?*
- *From Izmir. Are you students?*
- *(one of the girls) Only me, I am a student at a vocational school for girls.*
- *Oh, that's good. And are you going to do the university exam?*
- *(All other girls, laughing) She can only dream about university. Her father will never let her go.*
- *You know what, I have a lot of students from this part of Turkey. Don't give up; you can surely do it if you really dream about it.*

I am still thinking about the shadow on that girl's face when her friends reminded her of the reality of my country. If you are born as a female in the eastern part of Turkey, it is very unlikely that you will find a chance to get education. Those who succeed to go to a university are the most determined and luckiest ones.

Wherever they are from, the students at university are in the same situation as one another. They pass the university entrance exam because they are taught exam strategies perfectly. After they pass the exam, they feel a kind of relaxation, because they did what they were supposed to do. However, this relaxation ends when most of the students face the reality that they do not know how to learn; as until that time, they were made to learn.

I have been teaching at Dokuz Eylül University in Izmir, Turkey since 1999. Like all new teachers, I was so idealistic when I started teaching. I wanted my students to learn each and every thing since it was my responsibility to make them learn. However, as I have gained more experience, I have figured out that I cannot be the person who is responsible for their learning. They should be the ones that are responsible for their own learning. Then, I heard about learner autonomy when I was studying for

my MA degree. I decided to do research in this field for my PhD. I read books and articles written by theorists and practitioners such as Benson, Lamb, Smith, Dam, Sinclair, Gardner and the others. I learnt a lot from those readings, but I got confused, too. What was learner autonomy? What about independent learning? What were the implications of it? I wanted my students to be autonomous learners, but what steps should we follow? I remember getting excited when one of the jury members for my PhD dissertation defence sent me information about the conference to be held at Zirve University. People whose writings I had read would be attending the conference. When I was also accepted as a presenter, I felt so lucky and excited.

The conference programme was very intensive. Each day started with lectures by plenary speakers after which we had to choose among ten different parallel presentations. It was very difficult to decide, because there were really interesting topics. As for me, I wanted to skip my own presentation and participate

in Lucy Cooker's *The non-linguistic outcomes of autonomous language learning: Learners' views*. Nevertheless, hearing these presentations about gripping topics was one of the most valuable outcomes of the conference. The conference topics were categorized under nine issues:

- Assessment in self-directed learning
- Autonomy and teacher education
- Autonomy in the classroom
- Developing life-long learners
- E-learning initiatives
- Learner and teacher experiences
- Managing independent learning centres
- Self-directed and self-access learning
- Autonomy for young children.

As one can understand from the list, the conference topics were comprehensive. However, in my opinion, it would have been good to have had a thematic focus on analyzing the relationship between culture and autonomy or political ideas behind learner autonomy. An Iranian participant's question about how to manage self-access centres in non-democratic societies can be taken as justification for the idea that cultural and political aspects of learner autonomy should have been included in the areas of focus for the conference. I had never thought about that question. It provoked another one in my mind. How about in so-called democratic societies or democratic societies with non-democratic school managements? Cultural boundaries and possible social, physical, and personal constraints might also have been addressed in the conference. I still cannot figure out the difficulties that may be confronted in non-democratic managements and how they could be overcome. This was the only missing part of the conference for me.

With regard to the plenaries, I was really impressed by David Gardner's presentation *Looking in and looking out: Managing a self-access centre*. He gave a really clear presentation about what a self-access centre is. The distinction between

the traditional point of view and the realistic point of view was emphasized and the role of a self-access centre (SAC) manager was explained in detail. While doing this, Gardner categorized the



components of a SAC manager's job as learners, teachers, senior managers, materials-activities-equipment, and learning environment. What should be taken into consideration while dealing with each of these components was also listed and a number of

practical ideas in the part about management decisions about materials and activities were suggested. I am sure that anyone who is planning to establish a self-access centre would have found much to utilize from his presentation.

Terry Lamb discussed the importance of assessment for autonomy instead of assessment of autonomy in his presentation *Assessment of or for autonomy? Strategies for supporting learner development*. Lamb discussed in detail the problems with measuring autonomy and why we want to measure autonomy. Assessing students during the learning process and involving them in the assessment using peer- and self-assessment in the classroom were mentioned. The rest of the presentation addressed the following question: *How, then, can autonomy be described in such a way as to provide a useful tool for needs analysis and specific target-setting, in order to facilitate assessment for autonomy, and lead to the further development of an individual's autonomy?* Lamb continued by analysing the roles of self-management, self-regulation, and meta-cognitive knowledge in development of learner autonomy. Suggestions for educating learners to take control and develop their autonomy were given at the end of the presentation.

Leni Dam's presentation *Developing learner autonomy with school kids* and her workshop *Developing learner autonomy: How can we get started?* were both

inspiring. She gave examples for successful classroom practice such as use of portfolios, 2-minute talk, posters, and making presentations. I was especially interested in the *pitfalls to be avoided in the 21st century*. In this part of presentation, Dam reminded us that it was a pitfall for the teacher “not to have enough confidence in the learner’s ability to be able to take over responsibility” and “to believe that developing learner autonomy is impossible with a course book.” In my opinion these two points should be considered seriously in relation to schools where teachers have to keep up with a strict schedule. Even in these circumstances, teachers can provide their students with settings in which they can make some choices. As Dam suggested, we as teachers should seek alternative answers to the question *How can I get my students to teach themselves?* instead of *How can I teach them?*

The workshops given by Leni Dam and Garold Murray gave the participants a chance to transfer their learning into something practical. In Dam’s workshop, we studied in groups and gave information to each other about our contexts. Then, we shared ideas about our plans for the following week’s lessons. In Murray’s workshop we studied in groups of three. The possible ways of integrating self-access language learning into the curriculum considering the context (the course-the students-language level), the place and the materials were discussed. Finally, we came back to reality and shared ideas about what to do as a next step in our local settings.

While writing “came back to reality” in the last sentence above, I remembered the conversation with the girls in Mardin. Getting an education is not given to them as a choice. They have to struggle for it. The students in our classes, however, are the lucky ones. Why do we deprive *them* of choices? They can surely be autonomous learners with the assistance of teachers. As teachers, we should not leave them alone. As Richard Smith emphasized in his presentation, the teacher’s role is

crucial in learner autonomy; by sharing experiences and engaging and developing our own autonomy as learners of teaching, we can help our students to become autonomous learners. Conferences such as the one held in Gaziantep at Zirve University, Turkey represent a wonderful



opportunity to discuss and exchange our experiences and views with each other.

Finally, I would like to thank to Dr. Hidayet Tok and Mr. Mehmet Boyno, the conference organizers, for their hard work and hospitality, and to all participants for their enthusiasm and efforts for academic collaboration.

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